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IT DIDN'T HAPPEN IN ASHEVILLE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Asheville's story is one of a community's effort to develop a strategy to increase exposure, utilizing a World's Fair theme. The result was only a slight increase in the volume of business as compared to what was anticipated.

INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to share with you the Asheville story. Let us move back in time to about a year and a half before the beginning of the 1982 World's Fair. Asheville had a promotions committee which is part of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, and this promotion committee became the World's Fair Committee. I was called one day and asked to come in and chair this committee and at that point in time they did not tell me everything that they had in mind. It seems that chambers sometimes function this way.

It seems in the Asheville history the most money they had ever raised was \$30,000. They told me they wanted to raise \$140,000 from the community to promote Asheville as a tourism center and jumping off point for the World's Fair. We put together a plan and had an excellent committee. The community responded beautifully. We raised \$145,000. This enabled us to obtain state matching funds for western North Carolina in the amount of \$150,000, so actually we had a promotional fund of some \$300,00 and an additional fund of some \$45,000 for us to use for added campaign impact.

Now the majority of the promotional budget was going to be earmarked for promoting western North Carolina. The theme line of the campaign went something like this "Turn in here for the World's Fair." Ads were placed in the southeastern part of the United States in most of the popular magazines who have high circulation, Southern Living for example.

PLANNING

Let me digress a moment and go back to the planning process. We took a look at a map. Here is Asheville, the closest city to Knoxville, a very easy two hour drive, Interstate 40 all the way. Then additional information told us that Knoxville had approximately 5,000 rooms. The World's Fair projection was in excess of 60,000 visitors a day, with recommendations that visitors spend at least two days on the fairgrounds in order to enjoy the entire 75 acre complex. It certainly does not take much time to get excited about this because the World's Fair had to back up to Asheville, North Carolina! No question about it. Asheville had about 3,500 rooms. It has long been a tourist area and we have one of the foremost attractions in all of these United States in the form of the Biltmore House and Gardens. In the past year prior to the World's Fair, they attracted in excess of a half million visitors to their complex and to the city of Asheville.

We decided early on that we would mount a very sophisticated campaign placed through a very experienced advertising agency and we would put together a group of people who are bilingual and who could certainly handle any foreign visitor who would come into the area. The Asheville Chamber of Commerce operates a visitors center. Additional people were interviewed and employed to man the visitors center. As the promotional campaign came along, we chartered buses and went over to the Fair site on several occasions to see the construction in progress.

We received excellent cooperation from Carroll Logan. He came to Asheville many times and on one occasion he brought over a sound and slide show that was just exceptional. Needless to say the Asheville business community was truly excited about the prospect of Asheville becoming a boom city during the World's Fair.

All the plans were laid, all the advertising was placed. We were all set for a great influx of visitors. The Fair opened and we didn't see anybody. It seemed as though they passed us by on Interstate 40. We could not put any sort of moat or draw bridge on Interstate 40 to slow down the tourists. The motel operators immediately started to say to the Chamber, "So you gave a World's Fair and nobody came." Well, they were coming into Knoxville without question, but they were not stopping in Asheville. The ad campaign was a good one. Many of the ads were in full color and very well prepared; "Turn in here for the World's Fair." It just did not happen for Asheville, North Carolina.

It did happen for the Biltmore House and Gardens. We have to talk about this or ask Mike who is here from the Biltmore House to tell their story. The Biltmore House and Gardens increased their ad campaign. They have an enormous advertising budget, but they added to it. Certainly tour bus operators made the Biltmore House and Gardens part of their tours.

So many tours came into and out of Asheville. Asheville benefited without question by numbers of people coming through and I underscore through Asheville. We simply could not slow them down. We couldn't get them to spend the night.

Now early on many of our motels had advance reservations. Some of our motels would not give out rates before the Fair opened, which was a mistake. A word called greed came into the picture. Many of the people felt that they could increase the room rates by 30%, 50%, 70%, 90%, or even 100% and this was a real mistake. Some of our local motel operators who had had some advance reservations prior to the opening of the Fair

had people calling and cancelling these reservations when they realized they could stay in Knoxville or closer to the Fair.

A local Asheville businessman, who became very excited about the prospect of the Fair backing up to Asheville, purchased 40 new buses. It was a multi-million dollar purchase. He planned to provide this bus service from Asheville to Knoxville and in return travelers would not be bothered with the traffic in Knoxville. They would not have to worry about finding a parking place for their car in Knoxville. They could simply ride back comfortably that evening. But it did not happen for him. He only used ten of those 40 buses. This was a very disappointing experience for this local entrepreneur.

We have tried to examine what happened. There were other entrepreneurial activities; several bed and breakfast operations came on the local scene and did extensive advertising. One in particular spent almost \$5,000 in advertising. We noted in the visitors center that as mid-summer came on visitors were increasing. In August we had over 16,000; in the preceeding year the number was only 6,000 and so certainly the visitors were coming into Asheville asking for information and moving on to the Knoxville area. We listened very closely to our visitors. In the past they have asked three very basic questions as a rule. Question number one was, "how to get to the Biltmore House?" Question number two was, "accommodations." Question number three was related to food. This year the visitors came in and asked directions to the Biltmore House. They were not interested in accommodations or food. They also asked how long it takes to get to the World's Fair? We were providing a lot of maps of Knoxville.

What happened and why? We have tried to find out, right up until midnight last night and we do not have any hard answers for you. We think that it was perhaps a variety of things. Initially, there was some bad publicity out of Knoxville. I am sure you are familiar with some of the evictions that took place, a very unfortunate occurrence that received some national exposure. Many people in Knoxville felt that they, too, would have the opportunity to tap into the gold mine. Why would that bad publicity have any adverse effect on Asheville? We tend to believe that the publicity caused people to think a little bit more about their travel and where they would stay. Many motels in Asheville which received cancellations quickly learned that these people were moving on to the Knoxville area. Indeed there were no parking problems in and around the World's Fair, indeed rooms were available, and Carroll would have to correct me on this, but I really believe early on people were not staying for two days. They were driving in and driving out. We tried to find out where these people were going. Were they going on to Nashville, Tennessee and Opryland, were they going South into Atlanta and Six Flags, or were they going to the beach? We tend to believe that these people were taking shorter vacations. They were truly looking for economy accommodations.

SUMMARY

The bottom line for Asheville, north Carolina would go something like this-the Biltmore House and Gardens are enjoying plus figures which they have enjoyed all season long. The Biltmore House and Gardens did an exceptional advertising campaign. Others in the Asheville area did not

put forth any extra effort. They said, "It will happen for us anyway. The people will be here anyway; therefore, we will not advertise at our individual facilities." The overall \$300,00 campaign that was mounted, no doubt reached people and brought them into the World's Fair, but not to Asheville.

The Asheville Chamber of Commerce added to this promotional activity with a mailout campaign every five days to 115 newspapers in the Southeast. Stories were invented, developed, and embellished, and everything that could be told about the Asheville area, the Biltmore House and Gardens, the beautiful scenic drives in and around Asheville, the trout fishing that was available, an authentic castle that you could fly over if you owned a helicopter, anything that we could put together was fed out to all the newspapers. But we simply could not make it happen.

Some months ago, calls started to come into the Chamber from restaurants and motels asking when it was going to happen. The Chamber got busy and put the following information together. Actually the tourism season for Asheville was a plus season. Had it not been for the World's Fair, it would have been a minus season without question. The Asheville Chamber of Commerce feels that tourism in Asheville was up 10% to 15% overall and certainly it was a plus. We know without question that many thousands of people came through Asheville and viewed it either from the Interstate or from the roads in and out of the Biltmore House on their way to the World's Fair.

The Asheville Chamber of Commerce has a Tourism Department and this particular department spends a great deal of time working with tour brokers. The head of this department attended national meetings of the tour brokers and is very active in working with them in arranging tours into the Asheville area. I am sure this contributed to the plus figures of the Biltmore House.

We did have an 800 toll free telephone number and we did publish a listing of all the facilities in and attractions around the Asheville area. These publications were sent out by the thousands and there was a great deal of activity on the 800 line without question. I would guess that 20,000 to 25,000 or even more publications went out as a direct result of this advertising. But it didn't happen at Asheville!
